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Staff Resistance and Highly-Skilled Volunteers

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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As this is the middle of Spring conference season, I have been on the road quite a bit these past weeks. Being in the field is a wonderful reality check, although it can be depressing as well as inspiring. For some reason I have hit a wave of workshops in which participants have struggled with what to “do” with volunteers. Ironically, it seems to be hardest for folks to imagine putting high-powered volunteers to work effectively. Of course, if these same community members offered checks for \$10,000, no one would have trouble spending the cash! But actually having to deal face-to-face with someone able to contribute services of that high a VALUE is something else again.

While not a startling revelation, I have become more and more convinced that a major reason employees are hesitant to accept high-skill volunteers is a lack of creativity in creating assignments for volunteers to accomplish. The problem is two-fold. First, whether conscious or not, too many staff have low expectations of the skills or qualifications of potential volunteers, and so design work posing minimal risk if not done properly. Second, volunteer projects are most often carved out of the daily (or periodic) activities of the paid staff, defining volunteers as “assistants” focused on the same goals and strategies as the employees.

Both of these approaches are seriously flawed. Worse, they lead almost inevitably to conflict. Consider:

- The people attracted to low-level volunteer work will likely be, well, low-skilled themselves. So self-fulfilling prophecy runs its course. Employees may appreciate the volunteer “help,” but will hardly see volunteers as key advisors, for example.
- If someone with higher skills winds up in these assignments, she or he will soon chafe to do something more challenging. But, in their wish to keep the work simple so that volunteers (transitory as they are imagined to be) can be interchangeable, employees resist adding more responsibilities to one volunteer’s schedule.

- Volunteer work becomes totally associated with employee work. Now if volunteers are substantively different from the staff in age, background, or whatever, how can employees trust the work will be done as they would do it? And doesn't this open the door to volunteers feeling that they are doing what employees are paid to do?

I'd like to offer a suggestion. Gather a few people together in your office and run a think tank called "What If..." The object is to try to wipe the slate clean and see what would happen if you started from scratch. Answer the following questions

- What if we asked our clients/customers what they most wanted from us? Would they name the services we are providing now or different ones? What gaps might they identify?
- What if we expanded our client base beyond the individuals or groups we serve now? Might we offer programs to, say, the extended families of our primary target population? Their employers? Who else?
- What if we provided services on the days and times most useful to our consumers? What would these be?
- What if we were able to coordinate our services with other services our clients receive from other agencies? How could this be done to minimize duplication and maximize resources?
- What if we had no staff at all and had to hire from the beginning? What qualifications would we seek today? What schedule would we ask?

You can see how these questions open up new possibilities. Do any of the ideas suggest completely new ways volunteers might be put to work? If nothing else, try to avoid the "staff assistant" scenario. I'm not saying it's wrong to assign volunteers to help employees. It's just limiting. Try: what do our clients or their families need that no employee is ever going to be able to offer, but that would strengthen the service they receive from our organization?

Please share YOUR examples of non-staff-related volunteer assignments that you have developed which tap special talents or higher level skills. Or let us know how you elicit creativity from your organization when it comes to volunteer work design.

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Submitted by Alyson Woloshyn, Kitchener Parks and Recreation, Ontario

Volunteering in many aspects is taking on more than just the philanthropic action it was once viewed as, and today many people are looking at volunteering as a way of gaining experience by using their own skills. Consequently, the challenge is to try and match these skills with the task. Speaking from experience, being given menial tasks and little responsibility was the quickest way to send me looking

for a new organization. However, providing opportunities that challenge the highly skilled volunteers also means that the organization has to give up more responsibility and sometimes that means more risk. It can pay off in the long run however, with increased pressures on our time as managers as it is, giving these tasks while providing adequate support so that the volunteer succeeds and providing recognition so that they feel appreciated may cause new and exciting challenges for volunteer managers.

Submitted by Patricia Wallace, Manager, Volunteer Services, Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, Pennsylvania

Highly skilled volunteers can be wonderful when their skills match your needs. Unfortunately, designing unique, personalized positions for them is time-consuming. I have invested a good deal of my time doing this for certain individuals, only to have them leave quickly. Please do not think that they left because of the position. More frequently, something comes up in their personal lives and they simply cannot meet the commitment. I am wary of the 'uniquely' skilled as I must carefully parcel out the too little time I have to complete what is expected of me. I find we get more bang for our buck by placing volunteers in standard positions, many of which are quite challenging.

Submitted by Laura Slater, Program Director, ND USA

WOW finally someone says what I have been thinking. Thanks. I printed this off and am handing it to the director of my sponsoring agency when I get there. We are a community action agency and we do not utilize volunteers like we should. We are a rural town two hours from any big cities and we have so many on welfare that have to volunteer twenty hours a week to get their benefits and agencies, if they even use these people, are putting them to work shredding paper or cleaning floors. I am distraught as an ex-welfare recipient. HOW DEGRADING to these people. I finally started to use the community service workers because we had an abundance of them suddenly. I put the boy I got to work making databases and writing reports that I had not had time to do and now I am so grateful for all his help. I have name lists on youth that attended my events. To put this information together myself would have meant I had to slow down on the activities that I was providing to the youth in my program. The other ladies in my office would put this young man to work doing the cleaning tasks when I was not there and he had an attitude problem according to them but they now tease me because they say he really liked me. Go Figure? I think that we need to realize that even if they are community service workers and welfare recipients they STILL HAVE FEELINGS. Make the most of the help.

Submitted by Rob Jackson, Volunteer Development Officer, Royal National Institute for the Blind, London, England

I agree that many organizations are not being innovative enough in engaging volunteers creatively - and then spouting on about how volunteers are harder to recruit than they used to be! Whilst I agree that, as a rule of thumb, low-level volunteer work will attract low-level volunteers, I have always liked the suggestion (originally Susan's I think) of engaging high level business people in low-level volunteer work. Envelope stuffing as relaxation for stressed out executives. One approach I have always found helpful in eliciting creativity in volunteer job design from paid staff is the model Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch put forward in 'Volunteer Management'. When I share their suggestions of ensuring each job gives the volunteer ownership, responsibility for results, authority to think and a means of keeping score, I often have the privilege of seeing the lights come on in the minds of colleagues as they are opened up to a whole new world of volunteer possibilities.

Submitted by Debbie Thompson, Volunteer Coordinator Faith Lutheran church, IL USA

Highly trained volunteers often bring in vision to organizations that paid staff do not have time to develop. It is frustrating to have a professionally trained volunteer offer to lead a program or develop a new process and be told that they are not wanted by the organization. I recently took a volunteer training class and one of the most important things that I heard was to hear that there is no room for ego in a volunteer organization. If a professionally trained person is willing to lead your program say thank you and let them lead it.

Once the guidelines are understood and the initial training in place I have discovered that professionally trained volunteers can become the trainers and leaders of other volunteers. They are great mentors for younger less qualified people and they are also helpful in promoting our programs to others in their professional communities. Be thankful they have seen value in your agencies and wish to come and spend time with you rather than going elsewhere with their commitments of time and service.

Not only is it helpful to have others with professional training, I too am a professional volunteer. I chose to start out a couple days a week and now have worked my way into the possibility of a very nice professional job. In the beginning there were those that wondered what I was doing and if I was qualified. That gets better with time and good professional judgement. Now I am treated by everyone as nonpaid professional staff, with the same responsibilities and decision making power as the other paid staff.

Overall I see people as afraid to utilize professional volunteers because we all too readily see our own deficiencies. If professional volunteers can help us to learn and to improve our agencies then it is our duty to utilize all volunteers that offer their services to our agencies. We are not expected to have all of the answers, but if we have the resources to help find them USE THEM! I once told my own advisory board that I would be glad to take my volunteer time elsewhere if they couldn't use it. It was amazing how quickly they were able to find me a job.

Submitted by Joyce Conner, Volunteer Resources Manager, Ohio

I feel fortunate that highly skilled volunteers seem to gravitate to our local government volunteer program. I think there are several reasons for this. Our program is well-established and well-known as a well-run program. Our staff is very accepting and appreciative of all volunteers, whether they answer phones or deliver mail or write reports. We have a wide-range of opportunities for volunteers of all ages, skill levels, interest areas and varying time schedules and our staff is open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. We have several committees and special events that are chaired by high-profile volunteers and staffed by volunteers with a minimum of staff support.

The highly skilled volunteers have been very helpful to us in some highly skilled areas. For example, a volunteer is checking our computer system to make sure everything is Y2K compatible and another volunteer is doing all the research for us to apply for a safety grant. Honestly, I have recruited volunteers for some assignments that I don't fully understand, but if they have the skills and experience needed, I refer them to the staff person to determine if the volunteer has the right qualities for the assignment. Some of these include video detection specialist, GIS consultant and engineering technician.

This didn't happen overnight, but over a number of years with lots of encouragement and support. And we are still building our program and looking for new opportunities for volunteers to become involved in their city.

Submitted by Mary Kay Hood, Director of Volunteer Services, Hendricks Community Hospital, Danville, Indiana -- USA

When I think about non-supportive volunteer efforts (non-assistant types), these few things come to mind. Volunteers at our hospital entirely staff the copy center where such work includes copying, collating, stapling, binding, laminating and paper shredding. Last year, volunteers were responsible for a volume of over 1.6 million. There are no paid employees supporting the copy center and these volunteers all report directly to me. Volunteers entirely staff the gift shop at the hospital and gift shop hours are from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. Monday through Fridays and 12 noon to 5 p.m. on weekends. There is a paid gift shop manager but again all staffing is volunteer driven. Volunteers are responsible for mail delivery -- with two runs each day. They pick up, sort and deliver once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Again, there is no paid staffing supporting this effort. Just a few things -- but put a new perspective on it for me. Thanks!

Submitted by Marcia Hale, Manager, Volunteer Services Chabot Observatory, CA, USA

When a former Hollywood special effects wizard called offering his services to the museum where I worked, I almost passed on him. I couldn't imagine convincing our designers to let a volunteer, even one with his very high caliber of skills, join their very closed group. Instead I assigned our wizard to

the Events department. The lighting and effects he created blew everyone away. The Events department was used to making do with the leftover design time from the designers, but this time they had someone who had all the skills and most importantly plenty of time for them!

This volunteer soon offered to teach a workshop on creating special effects, one for volunteers and one for staff. The design staff, curious about this new found volunteer attended and were blown away. Needless to say, they snatched this wonderful wizard immediately. He is such a fixture at the museum many people think he is full time staff, but he happily stays a volunteer continuing to do the work he loves.

Now, when a highly skilled volunteer comes my way, I spend the time to think creatively, knowing that I almost passed up the opportunity to involve a highly skilled volunteer because I was just sure I couldn't convince the right department to utilize his skills. The right people will generally gravitate towards each other, sometimes, though, it takes a little creativity! Don't give up, truly smart staff know a good volunteer when they see one!

Submitted by Lesley Dunn, Executive Director, Volunteer Resource Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia

The highly skilled volunteer brings about an interesting challenge. Often seen as requiring little to no supervision, they actively seek out tasks without direction. As a result they are often overlooked by staff and supervisors. Volunteers with limited skill sets require far more supervision and tend to require a great deal of interaction from us, and leaving us feeling drained at the end of the encounter. We are delighted and relieved when someone arrives on our doorstep who instinctively knows what to do. They go quickly and quietly about their duties, and before you know it their shift is complete and they have left.

I have never worked in an environment where skilled volunteers have been seen as a problem. I have though on many occasions observed staff become completely engaged in their own work assignments that they forget to interact with this volunteer. This is not an intentional oversight by the staff member, but more a reflection of their comfort level in having skilled support on hand enabling them to redirect their energies to other activities.

Submitted by Nancy Bailey, numerous organizations over the years, Texas USA

Volunteers like to feel useful -- not used.

Submitted by Carol Freed, volunteer for 26 years in various organizations, Bend, Oregon

You have identified a serious problem with volunteer management. Being a highly skilled volunteer myself, I know the difficulty in getting paid staff to accept me for my ideas, vision and leadership

qualities rather than assigning me typing jobs they think I am best suited for because I do medical transcription. This is a critically important discussion, because more and more professionally trained people are taking early retirement and their kids are grown and have left home and these people have time and skills and experience they want to share in meaningful ways. Bottom line....either find a place for highly skilled volunteers or they will move on to another group that will accept and appreciate them and allow them some level of creativity to really make a difference, while still respecting paid staff and their policies.

Submitted by Linda, Volunteer Coordinator, Regina Public Schools, Sask., Canada

Issues related to skilled volunteers and employees are even more complicated if the employees are union based.. How do I convince threatened union members that there is not a conspiracy to replace paid staff, and that by agreeing on volunteer vs. staff tasks, everyone will feel more comfortable?

Submitted by Ronnie Rusk, Canadian Diabetes Association, Ontario, Canada

Highly skilled volunteers are a treasure we generally do not know how to use. Many people on my staff feel threatened by these "treasures." Staff 1) feel they cannot "control" highly skilled volunteers: that these volunteers will not adhere to agency policy; 2) they require orientation and ongoing consultation that is more time consuming and sophisticated than the staff members have time and/or ability to offer; and 3) they may make misleading remarks to influential people. Staff at the organization I work for are gradually accepting highly skilled volunteers. To accomplish this we are creating very clear job descriptions, and developing orientation and training models for specific programs. It's frustrating for highly skilled volunteers to find that they aren't instantly appreciated. It is frustrating for the volunteer recruiter not to find people instinctively welcome these "treasures."

Comments from Readers

Submitted on August 19th, 2016
Anonymous, Massachusetts, USA

I am writing as member of the volunteer ranks as opposed to being paid staff. I have been reading through these forums to gain some understanding of what future changes I might expect from our museum's management regarding volunteers. Although much of it does, many of the accepted principles found herein are not applicable at this organization. This is not to say they shouldn't be, but how these concepts would be implemented is the question.

The museum is a major attraction in the region, and is quite vast in terms of size and holdings. We differ from many other organizations in that we maintain and display highly technical equipment and machinery, as well as the more typical historical artifacts found in museums.

In contrast to many of the examples I've read, in this case, the volunteers possess virtually all of the technical know how, and share a long history with this equipment. Most of us work or have worked in the subject field professionally, and have more than three quarters of a century of collective experience. This has always been the case as long as I've been around. Historically, it has been the volunteers that have initiated and executed most of the exhibit development that has taken place in the 50 years since the museum's opening.

Everything however is about to change. There has already been a shift in trend from the status quo regarding the volunteers. Our role as it seems, is about to be reevaluated, and most likely more restricted. This includes a more formalized volunteer application procedure, I.D badges, sign in sheets, etc. All of which are fine. Also circulating are rumors of activity reports, project proposals, procedures, and risk assessments which are while annoying, are certainly manageable. The topic of key control, and limiting access to exhibits, and project planning and development are the most concerning of the changes taking place. Many of the volunteers who built these exhibits with their own hands (and sometimes money) are facing being locked out of these areas. The biggest fear is the place moving in the wrong direction toward having a polarized environment where the attitude is "they're just volunteers." There is a volunteer coordinator who we should be dealing with directly Unfortunately, that position is only a collateral duty, and the person is very busy with their primary responsibilities. There has been extensive staff turnover in the last year or so, and just about all of the administrators that had any technical knowledge have left. This would be fine if their subordinate workers had even minimally adequate understanding of the machines that they "maintain." This is unfortunately not the case. The management structure is the epitome of the "upside down triangle." The office is top heavy with directors of this, and directors of that, none of which have any experience whatsoever with the technical side of the museum's holdings. There is no middle management present, and a only a handful of unskilled general purpose maintenance workers at the floor level. "Maintenance staff" is even an exaggeration, because most of their skills do not extend beyond basic janitorial duties.

In addition to absorbing another nearby museum, a conventional one but of similar context, the organization hired a new Director of Collections who oversees both facilities. This seems to be a very broad and all encompassing position. There seems to be much confusion over the jurisdiction of this director even among the other staff. In a world of ever changing titles, I think the intent is for this individual to be a "director of operations," subordinate only to the Executive Director. So far this has been more self proclaimed than defined as so by the organization. They are currently conducting interviews for a new Executive Director as well.

My goal is for an efficient, mutually respectful working relationship between volunteers and staff. I know that we are not totally unique in the fact that we have a large contingent of highly skilled volunteers at this museum. I also know that other institutions have built wonderful team atmospheres among all of their people whether they are paid employees or not. I think that we are unique however in that compared to similar museums, the stark contrast in

knowledge between volunteer and staff member can not be paralleled. The role of the volunteers therefore should be further expanded, not restricted. Ego, fear, and insecurity seem to be driving forces behind this negative attitude toward our dedicated volunteers, and if we can't find a way to work together effectively, it will be the downfall of an otherwise great place to visit.

Submitted on August 21st, 2016

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Thank you for your well-articulated and concerning response to my 1999 Hot Topic (it is now 2016 and -- clearly and sadly -- the core issues never change). I am going to reply to you directly and privately, but wanted to allow your comment to become public. This situation needs some external mediation or, as you predict, the future is very cloudy for your museum. Hope we can help in some way.

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